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NEWS RELEASE

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BENEWAH COUNTY BENEFITS FROM \$11.7 MILLION DOLLAR INVESTMENT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & WELFARE

Last year, Benewah County residents and businesses received \$11.7 million from Department of Health & Welfare programs that help people in need. The investment benefits every one of the county's 9,000 residents. Of Idaho's 44 counties, Benewah County ranks number 4 in per capita outlay of Health & Welfare dollars. Last year Benewah County ranked 14 in per capita outlay.

The disbursement of state and federal tax dollars amounts to \$1,296 for every man, woman and child residing in Benewah County. Per capita spending was \$861 in Benewah County in 2003, \$400 less than in 2004. Nearly all of the increase is due to Medicaid costs. Per capita spending includes citizens who may not receive a single direct service from the Department. The statewide average is \$839 per capita.

The Department distributed \$1.15 billion in 2004 statewide in Idaho communities. These funds came from Medicaid, additional payments to hospitals, Food Stamps, the Idaho Child Care Program, the Women, Infants and Children nutritional program, foster care and a variety of other assistance programs.

"This is an investment for all Benewah County residents," says Health & Welfare Director Karl Kurtz. "These are tax dollars put to good use because they are used to help people become healthy and productive. This money goes go to foster care for children in crisis, substance abuse treatment for adults and adolescents, improvements and operations at the local hospital, and dozens of other badly needed services."

"This is as much about sustaining communities as it is investing," adds Kurtz. "By providing programs that support people, we are helping communities and their residents build the endurance and strength they need to remain vital. Everyone profits from this investment, not just those who use Department programs. This isn't just me pounding my chest. That's what community leaders tell us."

Benewah County Commission Chairman Jack Buell says, “Without (the Department’s) help, we would be upside down. There’d be a lot of people in trouble and the county would be too. (Medicaid) dollars take the burden off the county itself because the county is on a tight budget as it is. Our economy is not good.”

Last year, the Department’s Medicaid Division spent \$10 million on health care for residents of the county — \$3.5 million more than in 2003. A large share of the dollars went to drug stores like Jack’s Pharmacy in St. Maries. “The (Medicaid) money is extremely important to us. It’s about 20 percent of our business,” says pharmacy owner Chad Brown. “It’s an asset and it definitely helps pay expenses. It pays the expense of those drugs; it goes to maintenance; it goes to the pharmacist I hired for \$70,000 to \$80,000; it goes back into the community, you betcha.”

The story is much the same at Benewah Community Hospital. In addition to fees paid for inpatient and outpatient care of Medicaid clients, the hospital received \$290,000 from programs called Federal Upper Payment Limits and Disproportionate Share because the hospital has a larger than normal share of Medicaid patients. “(The extra money) is the difference between being in the black and red for us,” says Hospital Administrator Eric Fox. “We earmark that money to pay debt on the construction bonds for a recent construction project. It’s huge money. Without it, there would be a drastic impact on cash flow.” All payments from Medicaid to the hospital totaled nearly \$1 million in 2004.

Benewah County residents received \$583,700 in Food Stamps to feed their families in 2004 — that’s \$100,000 more than in 2003. Benewah Market in Plummer redeemed \$104,700 of that total. Manager Skip Skannen says those dollars are “very important.”

Plummer is less than an hour from Coeur d’Alene, an hour from Spokane, 20 minutes from St. Maries, and 45 from Moscow, where people can shop at bigger stores. But Benewah Market is the largest store in the local area. “We have lots of recipients of Food Stamps,” Skannen says. “It runs between \$300 and \$400 a day, seven days a week. So you can see how that is for us. Yesterday, for example, we had about \$1,000 in Food Stamps.”

Does this money allow him to create more jobs? “For the last couple of years, we are steady with around 25-26 employees. Right now we have 27. We don’t lay off. It does help us retain the people we have.”

Department spending helps people, and it has an upside for business, according to Idaho economist John Church. “This is not lost money. The spending is an investment. It goes back into the economy. If an employer came to town and spent this much money we would be elated. People need to remember that a big chunk of this is federal money which is a huge return on our taxes. This comes back and helps stimulate the economy and it helps people.”

Kurtz says, “Not only is the Department money a human investment, but it creates jobs and maintains healthy businesses. These dollars recycle numerous times in each community and help us keep the high quality of life we enjoy in Idaho. This is a wise use of taxpayer dollars because the money spent in the community often stays in the community. The dollars are spent again and again to help create jobs and an infrastructure that provides healthy and safe neighborhoods.”

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(**Editors:** Interviews are available on request. Contact Ross Mason at 334-0693 or Regional Director Michelle Britton at 755-3772 for more information.)

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investment in every Idaho County
can be found online at
<http://www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov>**